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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER ISSUES INSTRUCTION ON PROTESTANTS

1. (SBU) Summary: Prime Minister Phan Van Khai issued on February 4 an Instruction to guide Ministries and People's Committees in their relations with Protestant churches and believers. The document directs authorities to assist Protestant followers in celebrating their faith, including by opening churches, registering pastors and allowing denominations operating since 1975 to register their religious practice, even if they do not yet meet all criteria for official recognition. The Instruction also specifically bans forced renunciations of faith. In the Central Highlands, local authorities are to allow those groups that do not yet meet requirements to form a congregation to register and conduct their activities so long as they have no affiliation with separatist movements. End Summary

2. (SBU) The Prime Minister's Instruction (unofficial translation in Para 6) directs all relevant authorities to "create favorable conditions for Protestant followers to belong to their local communities." When a "true demand for religious practice is seen," authorities are told to register for religious practice the activities of those "Protestant cults and organizations that have not yet met enough conditions... to be recognized." Authorities are also to consider for legal status organizations that have had "pure religious activities since 1975." Addressing the issue of forced renunciations, the Instruction directs authorities to "outlaw attempts to force people to follow a religion or deny a religion." Religious believers "disguised as Protestants" whose activities "go against the nation" are to be publicly announced, and "illegal missionaries" are to be punished.

3. (SBU) Focusing specifically on the Central Highlands, the Instruction directs authorities to "create favorable conditions for [congregations] to build places of worship." For those groups of believers who do not meet the full criteria of a congregation, authorities should allow them to "register for religious practice at a suitable place..." so long as the believers are not linked to FULRO or Dega separatists. In the Northwest Highlands, authorities are told to make similar accommodations for "followers who have practiced their religion for some time," but they are also to help people who have adopted Protestantism but "wish to come back to their traditional beliefs...."

4. (SBU) The Instruction was released in a limited way on February 4, and notice appeared in some Vietnamese newspapers. The Government has since withheld the Instruction and plans to re-release it to the press on February 16. We have obtained an advance copy. While few of our religious contacts have seen the Instruction, most are aware of it from media reports. Mission will report on their reaction septel, after the official release.

5. (SBU) Comment: This is a very positive document. It contains a specific command from the highest level of the GVN banning forced renunciations of faith. Potentially, it also allows house churches to reopen in the Central Highlands and act more freely in the Northwest Highlands. This goes a long way in meeting the criteria for progress in religious freedom that the Department has presented Vietnam with and upon which we based CPC designation. Of course orders at the highest level do not always lead to action at the local level, an excuse we hear often from the GVN. We will watch closely the GVN's efforts to put these orders into practice, although this is not something that will happen overnight. End comment.

6. (U) //Begin Unofficial Embassy Translation//

SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

PRIME MINISTER

No: 01/2005/CT-TTg

Hanoi, February 4, 2005

INSTRUCTION OF THE PRIME MINISTER

On some tasks regarding Protestantism

In implementing of the Party's guidance and State's policies on Protestantism in the past, concerned Ministries, services

and localities have exerted many efforts and achieved important results. Pure religious activities for Protestant clerics and adherents are ensured, which creates a positive atmosphere among believers and consolidates their trust in the Party's leadership. Protestant followers have actively participated in economic, cultural and social development and contributed to national construction.

In order to continue strictly to implement the Party's guidance and State's policies on religion and belief in general and Protestantism in particular, the Prime Minister requests that concerned Ministries, services, provincial and municipal People's Committees closely coordinate with the Vietnam Fatherland Front and mass organizations in strictly and effectively implementing the following tasks:

-- 1. Fully realize the Party's guidance and the State's legislation concerning beliefs and religions, and policies on Protestantism, while actively carrying out economic, cultural and social development projects for the improvement of people's living conditions; and create favorable conditions for Protestant followers to belong to their local communities, thus encouraging them to become more deeply involved in local economic, cultural and social development as well as national construction and defense.

-- 2. Raise public awareness about the need to create favorable conditions for Protestant followers and clerics to strictly implement the Party's policies and the State's legislation on beliefs and religions so as to ensure their religious practice is conducted in a normal routine and in conformity with the law; encourage every Protestant, cleric and adherent, to live a good religious and secular life in the service of God, the fatherland and the nation. Ensure that each citizen's freedom of religious and belief practice is observed; attempts to force people to follow a religion or deny their religion are strictly prohibited. Be determined to fight attempts by hostile forces to abuse Protestantism to incite people to act subversively, sow division among the people, and conduct activities going against the nation.

-- 3. Guide the Vietnam Protestant Church (northern region) and the Vietnam Protestant Church (southern region) to conduct their religious activities in line with their charters and regulations within the law.

-- 4. For Protestant in the Central Highlands, southern Truong Son region and central provinces: continue to consider and recognize eligible chapters of the Vietnam Protestant Church (southern region) and then create favorable conditions for them to build places of worship, and conduct training and arrange clerics who will take charge of managing those chapters that have been recognized by the law.

For groups of Protestants which have not met enough conditions under the requirements of the law to establish a congregation, communal and ward authorities should create favorable conditions for them to conduct their normal religious practice at home or permit them to register for religious practice at a suitable place in hamlets and villages, if there exists a pure demand for religious practice from local followers committed to follow regulations and not to support FULRO and be affiliated with Dega Protestantism (which is actually a reactionary FULRO-affiliated organization).

-- 5. For people of ethnic minority groups in northern mountainous areas who have just adopted Protestantism: considering their religious demand, devise proper policies along the following lines.

For those Protestant followers who have practiced their religion for some time, they should be guided to practice their religion at home or at a suitable place in hamlets and villages. When possible, Protestants should be encouraged to practice their religion in accordance with the law.

For people having adopted Protestantism who wish to come back to their traditional belief, they should be helped to realize their wish.

-- 6. To announce publicly to religious believers those disguised Protestants whose activities go against the nation and sow division among the people as well as their illegal activities and the State's punishments and clemency policies. As well, illegal missionaries will be strictly punished in accordance with the law.

-- 7. Protestant cults and organizations which have not met enough conditions under the requirements of the law to be recognized should be helped to register for religious practice with communal and ward authorities, if a true demand for religious practice is seen. Step by step, consider and recognize the legal status of Protestant cults

and organizations that had pure religious activities since 1975. If they meet all requirements of the law, they should be permitted to convene the General Assembly for the legal status recognition.

-- 8. According to current law, local People's Committees should facilitate requests for construction of places of worship, appointment of clerics, and training from recognized Protestant cults.

-- 9. Ministers of ministries, heads of Ministerial-level agencies and governmental offices, and chairmen of provincial and municipal People's Committees must be responsible for strictly implementing this Instruction.

The Government Committee for Religious Affairs is responsible for overseeing and guiding the implementation of the Instruction and providing reports to the Prime Minister.

Recipients:

Standing Secretariat,
President,
National Assembly Chairman,
Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers,
Office of the Central Party Committee and Commissions,
Office of the National Assembly,
Office of the President,
Vietnam Fatherland Front,
Ministries, Ministerial-level agencies and governmental offices,
Secretaries of Party's Committees and Chairmen of People's

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Committees of provinces and centrally run cities,
Supreme People's Procuracy,
Supreme People's Court,
Steering Committees for the Northwestern region, Central Highlands region, and Western South region,
Central offices of mass organization,
Official Gazette,
Office of the Government: BTCN, TBNC, research group, concerned divisions, departments and offices,
Speaker of the Prime Minister,
Archives

//End Unofficial Embassy Translation//
MARINE